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Easter 7C Ascension
Peace, Seattle
May 12, 2013
Acts 1:1-11; Luke 24:44-53

COMING ATTRACTIONS

When Yuri Gagarin, a Soviet cosmonaut and the first human being in outer space, returned from orbiting Earth he's reputed to have said: "I looked and looked but I didn't see any God up there," thereby confirming that all religion must be false.[1]

Now, whether he actually said those words, or whether the quote was invented to support the Soviet's anti-religion campaign, the statement "I didn't see God up there" lays out the same issue that accompanies our Ascension Day texts, **we're never quite sure how the physics of these scenes works out.**

How are we to understand what Luke has written?
- Is he describing an event within space and time?
- Does Jesus get into an invisible celestial elevator and push the button labeled "HEAVEN"?
- Or could there be something else to the story?

There are clues for us in both the Gospel and Acts readings today.
First up is the observation that Luke and Acts, though written by the same author, describe two separate ascension events.

In his gospel, what Luke describes as the first ascension, takes place the very day of Easter.
- After the women's experience at the empty tomb;
- after two disciples encounter the risen Jesus on the road to Emmaus;
- and after their eyes are opened when Jesus breaks bread with them, they hurry back to Jerusalem to share their news—and find the Risen One in their midst once more…
- Luke ends his gospel with an ascension that takes place that same night of Easter.

But in the story that opens his sequel – the Acts of the Apostles – the ascension takes place at the end of 40 days of appearances and teaching by Jesus.

What gives? Is Luke trying to confuse us—is he himself confused? Or is something else at stake?

Well, something else is at stake. And that something else is best understood not PHYSICALLY but THEOLOGICALLY. Five points.

(1) First, Jesus' departure from Earth to be with God is an affirmation of his life and ministry and a vindication of his death and resurrection.

In the Christian way of thinking Jesus and God are now inseparable. It is no longer possible to talk about God without talking about Jesus—and this unity with God alters our picture of God.[2]
No longer can we imagine God in a way that leaves God simply "watching us from a distance," to quote a song made popular by Bet Midler some years ago.

[1] Dispute over this quote has its own life. According to Wikipedia, no such words appear in the verbatim record of his conversations with Earth-based stations during the spaceflight.[20] In a 2006 interview, Gagarin's friend Colonel Valentin Petrov stated that the cosmonaut never said such words, and that the quote originated from Nikita Khrushchev's speech about the state's anti-religion campaign.[21] Read more details at: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yuri_Gagarin
[2] Mark Tranvik, WorkingPreacher.org.

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The creedal language that says Jesus "sits at the right hand of God" confirms something new: The God revealed to us in Jesus is not only Almighty, but also All-tender—even vulnerable, willing to lay down his life; this God is not aloof or detached but approachable—ever close to us and our experiences.

(2) Second, because Jesus is with God, and God is everywhere, Jesus is everywhere. No longer bound by physical, human limitations or constrained by time and space, his presence can be experienced anywhere.[3] Indeed, we experience his real presence in the waters of baptism, the wine and wheat of the Eucharist, in the good news of Scripture, in this gathered community, in our life of prayer, and in a million other ways and places, as he reveals himself to us. He is with us always.

(3) Third, Jesus' ascension confirms who truly is Lord of life. At the time the gospels were written, the title LORD belonged to Caesar. But the New Testament's claim is that Jesus, not Caesar, is Lord. As Matthew puts it so profoundly in his own Ascension scene: ALL AUTHORITY IN HEAVEN AND ON EARTH IS GIVEN TO ME.

(4) Fourth, Jesus is not a figure of the past, but an abiding presence through his Spirit, today. Christ's ascension and the promised of the Holy Spirit means God isn't finished with us yet! In both Luke and Acts, Jesus tells his disciples that something is about to happen that will propel them into the world in a way they can scarcely imagine.

(5) There's one more key for understanding these texts, and it's built around the question the disciples ask in Acts 1:6.

LORD, they ask, IS THIS THE TIME WHEN YOU WILL RESTORE THE KINGDOM TO ISRAEL?

The word I'm most interested in is RESTORE. But first, a digression…

The PBS drama, Downton Abbey, has become a runaway hit all over the world.

The location where the series is set is England's Highclere Castle, home to the Carnarvon family since 1679, and heir to a rich history. Since taking over stewardship of Highclere in recent decades, the current Earl and Lady Carnarvon have poured millions into repairing and restoring the castle, and if you've ever seen an episode of Downton Abbey, you know how grandly it presents itself.[4]

Here's my point: Restoration of landmark buildings—like Highclere—is an all-consuming enterprise whose inspiration is forever fixed on the past. If there is a future to be had, it can only be understood as being anchored in what has been.

When the disciples ask Jesus, IS THIS THE TIME WHEN YOU WILL RESTORE THE KINGDOM TO ISRAEL?, they are demonstrating that their minds, their thinking, are firmly oriented toward the past. That's what the word RESTORE is about. They have no way of imagining a future that is other than a revisiting of what they have known.

Notice how Jesus responds. First, he says "don't worry about timelines…that's God's department, not yours."

And then he says—(and here's the important part)—

YOU WILL RECEIVE POWER WHEN THE HOLY SPIRIT HAS COME UPON YOU;

[3] Marcus Borg, *Speaking Christian*, p. 180.
[4] http://www.highclerecastle.co.uk/index.html

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> AND YOU WILL BE MY WITNESSES IN JERUSALEM, IN ALL JUDEA AND SAMARIA, AND TO THE ENDS OF THE EARTH.

The mission they're about to be sent on will propel them to places, to people, to encounters, they have never known before! The mission for which God is preparing them—and preparing us—will not be limited or defined by what we did in the PAST—no matter how wonderful or appropriate or good it may have been.

The Spirit will coax us to take new paths, to try new strategies for engaging the world and serving as witnesses to the Lord who holds not just the past but the future in his hands. Does that make you nervous like it does me? It should!

The adventurous journey to which the Spirit calls us, will be "by paths as yet untrodden, through perils unknown…"

Our vision statement says it this way (and says it well):

> …we are called…to discern God's challenge into unfamiliar places, and to venture beyond ourselves, so all people will experience God's love.

At its core, this Ascension Day is not an <u>end point</u> so much as a <u>prelude</u>; not a <u>conclusion</u> so much as a <u>preview</u> of coming attractions.

The Mothering God who gave us birth and who took our form, is still at work, doing new things in us, with us, and through us. And for that we say, Thanks be to God!

PRAYER:
Lord God, Incarnate one, Holy Spirit, you have called us to ventures of which we cannot see the ending, by paths as yet untrodden, through perils unknown. Give us faith to go out with good courage, not always knowing where we go, but knowing that your hand is leading us, your love supporting us, and your Spirit is guiding us, through JC our Lord.